



Università Commerciale
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Bocconi

GUIDE TO WRITING A MASTER OF SCIENCE THESIS

Prepared by the Università Bocconi Graduate School Council



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O. Introduction

The thesis is the concluding activity in a course of study and is the result of research, carried out under the guidance of an advisor, on a topic dealing with the student's curriculum.

The student must have a command of the basic methods of the most significant disciplinary fields and must carry out an in-depth study of a specific topic expanding on theoretical, applicative and empirical aspects.

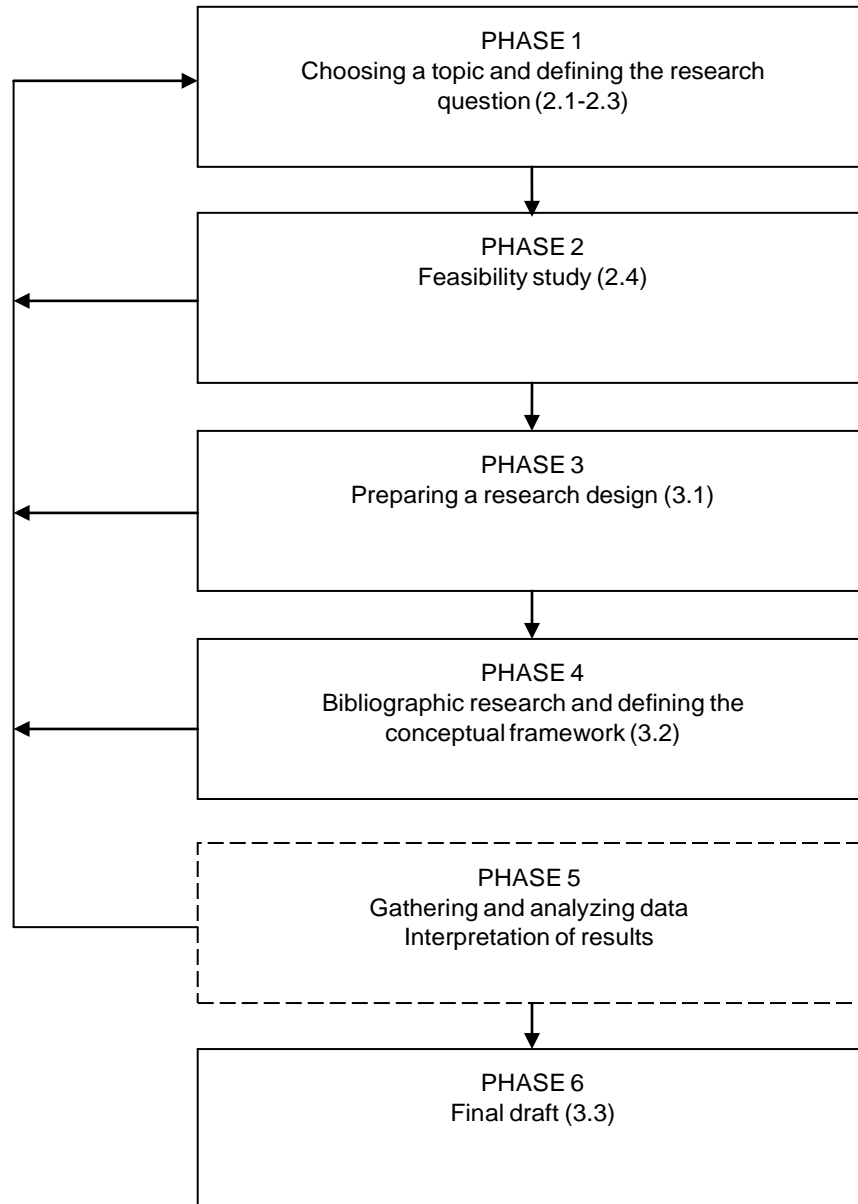
The University pays particular attention to the originality of the students' thesis; it must be the result of a personal contribution, must not be carried out with the aid of outside consulting firms, special attention must be paid to citations and must not contain texts taken from other sources. To this end the University has adopted ad hoc software in order to verify the originality of the work.

Should irregularities of the thesis be discovered, the student will be referred to the disciplinary board and appropriate measures will be taken.

1. Who this guide is for

This guide was designed to aid MSc students in the writing of their thesis. The suggestions and indications found in this guide can be applied to all MSc programs (ex 509/99) in the fields of study management 84/S and economics 64/S, and for Master of Science (ex 270/2004) in the fields of study management LM77 and economics LM56. There may be additional indications for each single degree program, according to the specific topics studied in each program. Any such indications will be given by the program directors, and will in any case be communicated by the thesis advisor as candidates write their theses.

This guide offers several suggestions regarding the process of planning the thesis project. It is important to note that the process which is described here in "linear" and sequential terms is, in reality, "circular" and repetitive. For example, defining the research question can cause candidates to revise the thesis topic or framework either partially or completely. A feasibility study might motivate candidates to choose a different topic or to simplify the research questions. In the same way, bibliographic research might make students reformulate, broaden (or reduce) the research questions. The following diagram summarizes the thesis process, and refers to the paragraphs in which each phase is described (except for Phase 5, "Gathering and analyzing data. Interpretation of results," which is specific to each topic and each individual thesis).





2. Choosing a topic and defining the research question

Choosing a topic and the related research questions for the MSc thesis is an important step in guaranteeing the quality of the project. Therefore it is crucial to dedicate a good part of one's time and energies to this part of the thesis process.

2.1. Identifying a topic and research question

The problem does not revolve around finding a *topic* to write about (*"what do I want to talk about in my thesis?"*). With very few exceptions, all of the topics dealt with in one's studies, or at least those regarding one's chosen discipline, can lend themselves to an interesting MSc thesis.

Rather, the problem consists in elaborating on and responding to one or more interesting *research questions* (*"what do I want to understand through my research, specifically?"*; *"what questions would be interesting to ask regarding the topic I've chosen, and how are they connected with each other?"*). From this perspective, even a topic which seems "traditional" at the start can offer very innovative ideas to work on. Identifying one or more research questions related to the chosen topic involves:

- carefully defining what the boundaries of the chosen topic are;
- identifying which aspects of the chosen topic to concentrate on;
- reflecting on the theoretical and practical relevance of the chosen research topic.

The topic and research question often arise spontaneously as a result of academic experiences, however they may also come from other experiences. For example, valid thesis topics may emerge during conferences and seminars which the student has attended, or from books, science magazines, specialized journals, websites and, more generally, from contacts with the "outside world."

Students are more likely to choose original and innovative topics and research questions when their ideas have come from more recent and up-to-date sources. Along these lines however, there are a few exceptions, manuals which are aimed at expounding knowledge of a given discipline rarely offer innovative ideas which can be used. Innovative ideas are more easily found, for example, in academic and managerial magazines, from reports presented at conferences, seminars and meetings, from working papers which are published on research centre websites, from consulting firms, public and private institutions as well as individual papers written by scholars.

Once a topic and one or more interesting questions have been identified, students can focus on these with the help of the thesis advisor.

Whatever path one takes in developing a topic and one or more related research questions, a MSc thesis topic must fit several basic requirements.

- **CONSISTENCY.** The topic must match the student's interests and be consistent with the educational path.
- **RELEVANCE.** The topic must be relevant to the student's chosen discipline. As already mentioned, relevance can be verified by reading specialized literature, and by interacting with experts in the field, especially with one's thesis advisor.
- **FEASIBILITY.** The topic and research question must be consistent with the student's abilities and knowledge. Topics and questions which require much use of statistical analysis tools are more suitable for students who have a strong quantitative background, whereas work centered on the analysis of texts and interviews can be more easily undertaken by students who have a predisposition to interpretative approaches. Topics and research questions must also be compatible with the available resources, the needed empirical data, the supporting theoretical references and the time available.
- **ORIGINALITY.** The topic and research question must be formed in such a way as to present an original and innovative contribution to the current state of knowledge. Given the centrality of this aspect, a paragraph will



be dedicated to this later. As an introduction, however, it is important that before beginning, students ask themselves the following questions regarding each of the possible research questions:

- *What are my research questions and why are they important?*
- *What do I think are the most appropriate ways to respond to these research questions?*
- *What results do I expect to have? What results do I expect from my research questions?*

From all that has been said it should be clear that the choice of topic is an important part of the MSc thesis project and is an activity which the candidate cannot delegate to others. The novelty of the chosen research question – as well as of the topic – influences the quality of the entire work and is an integral part of the thesis' final evaluation. Therefore the role of the thesis advisor is to help candidates fully focus their interests rather than, except for a few exceptions, to "assign" a thesis topic and related research question.

Given the importance and complexities involved in identifying a topic and research question, it is a good rule to face the problem early on, rather than waiting to complete all the other elements of the curriculum.

2.2 Offering an original contribution with the master of science thesis

A master of science thesis must be an original research study, or in any case it must demonstrate the student's ability for independent analysis. Candidates must show that they are able to develop knowledge of a topic to which the thesis is dedicated, even if only in an incremental way. This certainly means mastering what is already written on the chosen topic, but more importantly it means adding something "original" which others have not already said.

When talking about "originality" one should not think about making radically innovative contributions. A contribution can be "original" even when its range is limited to the proposal of a new way of interpreting a theory or existing model, to the identification and description of a phenomenon which no one has systematically analyzed yet, or to the study of a phenomenon which is already well-known, but analyzed through criteria which reveal aspects which have been neglected up to now. The replication of research which has already been carried out by others can also offer an "original" contribution, as well as re-elaboration of existing research from a new perspective.

To sum up, the originality of a MSc thesis can be found:

- in the chosen topic;
- in the approach or perspective taken during the study;
- in the empirical study method applied;
- in an innovative combination of these factors.

Even if the discussion of research results comes at the end of the project, it might be helpful to ask oneself at the start what one is expecting to find at the end of the project, and which topics will provide results. This does not mean deciding what the results of the research questions will be from the start, but verifying if a study has obvious or predictable results, or findings which are too generic. This can help one understand if the question should be fine-tuned or, in extreme cases, abandoned.

The criteria of originality which is described here should be an ideal to reach for, even if the level of originality which is required for a MSc thesis is not the same as that required for papers published in international academic journals. Some studies may be decidedly less original than others, but it is clear that this element will influence the study's evaluation.



2.3 The relationship between curricular internships and the master of science thesis

The MSc thesis must focus on a topic which is meaningful and relevant to the student's chosen discipline area. Therefore the thesis should not come from the internship experience and simply translate internship activities into a report.

Curricular internships can be, however, a source of ideas in identifying the thesis topic and related research questions. Internships can provide a part of the empirical data supporting arguments developed in the thesis, but they should not be the heart of the thesis. They can be a source of contacts which help in elaborating and extending everything that was observed during the internship period.

Furthermore, not only do internships not provide the conditions needed for finding an original idea for a graduate thesis, they also are not a necessary condition. Therefore it is important not to wait for the start of an internship before searching for a good thesis idea. It is more realistic to expect that the majority of research questions at the foundation of a thesis are *not* related to one's internship experience.

2.4 Feasibility study

Given one or more possible research questions, it is important to understand if they can be adequately dealt with in the thesis project, and talking with one's potential thesis advisor can help with this. The following are some questions which should be asked in order to verify feasibility. They can help one set up the project in the most correct way from the start (or in some cases help one understand that the initial idea should be abandoned):

- How do I intend to respond to the research question? Through pure reasoning and critical analysis of existing documents, or through an empirical analysis? How can I know if there is a reasonable certainty that I will have solid results?
- If it would be helpful to analyze empirical data, are this data available? What form are they in (for example, in electronic format or not)? What are the timelines? How big does the "sample" have to be in order to reach the results I want? Am I able to master the "technology" which is needed to gather and elaborate the data?
- If interviews or case studies are needed, how many do I need in order to have reliable and valid results? Can I realistically obtain the interviews or case studies? Who do I need to contact in companies? What time-frame is needed?

It is important to answer these questions because (a) it allows one to identify any weaknesses in the initial idea or the need to refine that idea before carrying out a more extensive and deeper review of existing literature on the topic; (b) it allows one to reach a first definition of the research design (see par. 3.1); (c) it allows one to understand what possible timing problems there might be in the production of the project. For example, if interviewing and gathering necessary data requires time, one cannot always wait to deal with that until after having written the theoretical part of the project.

3. Thesis composition

3.1 Preparing a research design

The research design is the action plan which describes the process starting with research questions and ending with thesis results. Defining the research design involves answering the following questions:

- In practice, how will the study be conducted?
- What approaches, methods and techniques will be used to gather and analyze data?



- What criteria will be used to guarantee the validity of the thesis? What could cause inaccurate results? How can I avoid any threats to the validity of the study?
- How do these elements form a consistent “strategy,” which can take me from research questions to thesis results?

Possible answers to these questions and the choice of those which are most suitable to one’s thesis will vary according to the student’s chosen discipline and research questions. A careful review of the related literature and interaction with the thesis advisor will help one make the best choices.

Furthermore, some elements of the research design must be defined, if one wants the thesis to be clear and precise.

Unit of analysis. Defining the unit of analysis with clarity means specifying the topic of study, or the phenomenon on which the thesis will focus. Since the thesis must provide an original contribution to a given topic, it is essential to set clear boundaries, in order to avoid vague and indefinite results.

Level of analysis. Once the unit of analysis is defined, it is generally a good idea to clarify the level (or multiple levels) at which one wants to conduct an analysis. A given topic of study can in fact be dealt with at different levels which are more or less “micro” or “macro”: the individual, the team, the company’s function, the company, the group, the industry, the country and so on.

Methods for gathering and analyzing data. The choice of a method(s) of gathering and analyzing data is closely related to the research questions and to the practices which are most frequently adopted in the student’s chosen discipline area, as well as to personal preference. A careful literature review and contact with one’s thesis advisor will allow one to clarify which methods are most suitable. Furthermore, the thesis advisor can provide bibliographic suggestions to elaborate on aspects of formulation and method.

3.2 Bibliographic research and defining the conceptual framework

Carrying out an accurate research and literature review is an integral and necessary part of the thesis project. It allows one to reach at least two basic goals, in two different phases:

- In a preliminary phase (generating research questions), it can help with developing interesting and innovative research questions which relate to the chosen topic;
- In a secondary phase – that is, when the research question(s) has already been defined – bibliographic research can help with understanding where the thesis stands in relation to existing knowledge in other research questions. In this way, literature review helps with verifying if the research question(s) is truly interesting and innovative and, if not, to modify or refine it.

Bibliographic research should not be aimed exclusively at “studying” the chosen topic and summarizing its outline. The aim of literature review should be rather to *generate new ideas, questions and hypotheses, to be verified through the thesis project.*

While carrying out research and literature reviews, students must continuously ask themselves the following questions:

- What are the most important contributions in the literature on this topic? Can these contributions provide new ideas for the thesis?
- What answers or new ideas do they suggest?
- If the authors have proved the validity of their answers, how did they do it?



- Are there any gaps in the existing literature on this topic, in terms of research questions without answers, unexplored empirical areas, or unresolved conflicts between studies which generate incompatible results?
- What gaps in knowledge does my thesis aim to fill?
- What kind of approach/model could be useful in responding to the research queries raised?

Comprehensive literature review is therefore essential, for several reasons:

- Literature review highlights aspects of the chosen topic which have been neglected by the related literature (aspects which the thesis could possibly fill in).
- It helps to define the research goals and question(s) or – if they have already been defined – to better focus on them;
- It helps one avoid repeating studies which have already been done by others, without being aware of it (or, if the thesis is aimed at repeating a previous research study, it helps one understand in detail how to carry out the study);
- It guides the choice of methods to adopt, through a careful study of choices made by other scholars.

Given these objectives, literature review can be done by following several logical routes:

- Starting with the chosen research topic and question(s).
- Generating several keywords to start the actual bibliographic research (from 3 to 7, according to the complexity of the topic and question). The generation of keywords can be facilitated by: talking to the thesis advisor; the first readings; using dictionaries, encyclopedias and manuals; brainstorming with colleagues; building simple logical-causal schemes.
- Once material has been identified and gathered, identify the key concepts and the main schools of thought.
- Analyze in particular the perspectives which one thinks are most useful for the thesis and highlight the results and boundaries of studies which provide useful ideas for research.
- Compare and assess the different perspectives taken, and avoid making an uncritical summary of the chosen contributions.
- Write up the final version of the description of the chosen topic, its boundaries and the research question or questions which the thesis will analyze.

Bibliographic research should range over a wide variety of Italian and international sources. Remember that the library offers numerous sources, including (besides books):

- Journals in print, and electronic support (since the selection of journals is fundamental for carrying out good bibliographic research, it is wise to verify their quality with the help of one's thesis advisor);
- Databanks (some of which contain numerous journals themselves);
- Series of working papers both in print and online;
- Documents on floppy disks and cd-rom;
- Statistics.

Appendix 2 provides a summary of the resources and services made available by the Bocconi Library to help with bibliographic research for theses.

3.3. Writing the final draft

The final draft involves writing out the thesis according to the indications given in the University regulations. It should be a concise presentation of the work carried out during the previously described phases.



The structure of the thesis can vary radically according to the discipline dealt with, the relative weight given to the theory in regards to the empirical foundation (if any), the method and approach used, as well as personal preference and suggestions from the thesis advisor.

A general outline – to be adapted according to the specific needs of one’s thesis and the indications of the thesis advisor – could be the following:

- *Table of Contents.*
- *Introduction* (a paragraph in which the following is described: the thesis topic, and its position in terms of the related literature including any knowledge gaps which the thesis aims to fill, and therefore a summary of the research questions at the foundation of the project; the contributions offered by the thesis; a brief illustration of the thesis structure).
- *A significant literature review* (a paragraph in which the following is illustrated critically: the subject background of the study; gaps and any existing controversies regarding the chosen topic; the research questions in detail, and the logical path with which they were developed).
- *Method* (with a description of the empirical area in which the study took place, as well as the criteria for gathering data, and the criteria for analyzing data which allowed one to draw conclusions).
- *Data* (a paragraph which describes the empirical data that was gathered and the results of the analysis).
- *Discussion* (where the data and results which were described in the preceding paragraph are discussed in light of existing theories, and the contributions of the thesis are described).
- *Conclusions* (a brief synthesis of the work undertaken and the results which emerged, any limitations of the thesis, implications for theory and, if any, for practice).
- *Bibliography* (*Appendix 1* offers several suggestions on how to write up the bibliography and how to cite sources in the text.)

4. Thesis presentation and discussion

4.1 Effective presentation of the MSc thesis

According to University regulations, the MSc thesis includes a final presentation which should be properly prepared. The candidate’s presentation cannot be longer than 20 minutes. The presentation should be aimed above all at highlighting the original contribution offered by the thesis, and the logical and analytical path with which the candidate is able to demonstrate the contribution. The presentation should not limit itself to simply providing a “summary” of the thesis.

The most important things to clarify are the following:

- What one wanted to research and why (the research question(s) and its relevance, briefly justified by a logical literature review);
- What methodology was used (surveys, analysis of archival material, case studies, experiments...);
- The results which emerged (summarized);
- What contributions emerge from those results both in terms of theory and practice;
- Any limitations of the project and possible ideas for overcoming them.

During the Graduation session it is forbidden to use presentation slides except for extraordinary cases justified by the advisor.



It is possible for the candidate to distribute materials (tables, graphs etc.) which may represent a useful support for the defence, especially in case of empirical thesis. In any case the graduating student should not only offer a simple reading of the materials distributed but also develop a detailed and in-depth comment.

After the candidate's presentation there will be a discussion between the members of the degree board and the candidate. This discussion is aimed at elaborating on the aspects dealt with in the thesis and stimulating discussion about those aspects.

4.2 The thesis advisor's role

The thesis advisor's role during the thesis discussion usually involves the following:

- Making a brief introductory report, in which the principal characteristics of the thesis are outlined;
- Acting as convener of the candidate's presentation by asking the candidate to present the work in general, or to highlight one of its more important aspects;
- Contributing to the discussion following the candidate's presentation. The discussion should be started by the discussant.

The advisor may identify a second advisor, if the thesis assigned is interdisciplinary; the second advisor refers to a different Department than the one of the Advisor and cooperates with him in supervising the thesis.

4.3 The discussant and board's role

The discussant has the task of putting the candidate's work under careful scrutiny as well as aiding the other members of the Board in understanding the strong points and limitations of the candidate's thesis. Once the candidate has finished the presentation and the thesis advisor has made any statements, the discussant will ask the candidate questions aimed at helping the candidate reveal any strong points of the thesis which did not emerge fully during the presentation, or to "defend" any aspects which are considered controversial.

The discussant intervention is expected and very important for those theses considered excellent.

Formal regulations regarding the MSc thesis, as well as details about the Graduation application procedures are described in the "Guide to the University" for Master of Science programs published on the website at www.unibocconi.eu/studentguide.



APPENDIX 1: GUIDELINES FOR WRITING THE BIBLIOGRAPHY AND CITING SOURCES IN THE TEXT¹

A) Writing the bibliography

Scientific journals:

- Surname and initials of author's name(s) (if more than one author, the last one is separated by "and")
- Year of publication (in parentheses, followed by "a", "b" etc. if there is more than one work of the same author/year)
- Title of article
- Name of journal (in italics)
- Volume number (in italics)
- Issue number (in parentheses)
- Page numbers of article

Examples:

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989a). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4): 532-550.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989b). Making fast strategic decisions in high-velocity environments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32(3): 543-576.

Books

- Surname and initials of author's name(s) (if more than one author, the last one is separated by "and")
- Year of publication (in parentheses)
- Title and subtitle of book (in italics)
- Edition
- Edition in original language, if any (optional; in parentheses)
- Place of publication
- Publishing house

Example:

Bailey, K.D. (1995). *Metodi della ricerca sociale*. 2nd Italian edition (Original edition: *Methods of social research*, New York, The Free Press, 1982). Bologna: Il Mulino.

Chapters in books edited by other authors

- Surname and initials of chapter author's name(s) (if more than one author, the last one is separated by "and")
- Year of publication (in parentheses)
- Chapter title
- Surname and name of the book's editor (if more than one author, the last one is separated by "and")

¹ Obviously, different solutions suggested by the advisor are possible. The chosen format should be systematically applied to all the citations.



- "Edited by" (in parentheses)
- Title of book (in italics)
- Edition
- Place of publication
- Publishing house
- Page numbers of chapter

Example:

Bickman, L., Rog, D.J., and Hedrick, T.E. (1998). Applied research design: A practical approach. In L. Bickman, and D.J. Rog (Edited by) *Handbook of applied social research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 5-37.

Working Papers

- Surname and initials of author's name(s) (if more than one author, the last one is separated by "and")
- Year of publication (in parentheses)
- Title and subtitle of WP (in italics)
- Title of WP series and WP number (if any)
- Editor/Place of publication

Examples:

Easton, G. (2004). *One case study is enough*. Working Paper. Lancaster University, UK.

Han, S-K., and Moen, P. (1998). *Clocking out: Multiplex time in retirement*. BLCC Working Paper n.98-3, Cornell University.

B) Citing sources in the text

Citing sources in the text can follow two criteria:

- Citing a source in a *footnote* at the bottom of the page, referred to by a number in the text;
- *Paranthetical reference*, in which the cited work is shown in the text, in parentheses.

Choosing one criteria over another depends on personal preference and on the regulations adopted by the relevant discipline area (for this last aspect, consult the related bibliography and ask one's thesis advisor).

The simplest criteria which is most frequently used in the managerial and financial disciplines – especially in limited works like journal articles and working papers – is paranthetical reference. This involves writing only the author's surname and the year of publication of the work separated by a comma, in parentheses, inside the text. If the author's name is already in the text, only the year of publication must be indicated in parentheses. If the concept which is expressed in the text refers to more than one author, all the references are included in parentheses, in alphabetical order, and separated by a semi-colon. If there are many authors to which the concept can be referred to, and one wants to cite only a few for simplicity's sake, their names should be preceded by "e.g." (which stands for "exemplum gratia", that is, "for example").

"The concept of 'grounded theory building' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) is a comparative methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data generated from case studies"



"Popular examples of research based on case studies include Selznick's (1949) TVA study or Allison's (1971) Cuban Missile Crisis study".

"The case studies may deal with one or more cases and at different levels of analysis (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989a; Yin, 1984)".

If the reference includes a part of cited text between quotation marks, add the number or numbers of pages where the cited text can be found to "surname/date":

"With reference to Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1986, p.352-3): 'we observed the results of an experiment analyzing the decision-making processes and coalition formation of groups...'"

If there are 3 or more authors, all their names must be included the first time the work is cited. From the second time on, it is sufficient to just include the surname of the first author, followed by "et al.", ("et alia", which means "the others") in italics. The example of the book chapter which is shown above would therefore be cited the first time as "... (Bickman, Rog and Hedrick, 1998) ...", and the second and successive times as "... (Bickman *et al.*, 1998) ...".



APPENDIX 2: BOCCONI LIBRARY RESOURCES

The Bocconi Library makes available a wide range of resources, searchable through the online catalogue (<http://lib.unibocconi.it>). In addition to the print resources (books and journals), there are many electronic resources (specialized databases, e-journals, working papers, statistics, floppy disks and CD-ROMs) focused on various subjects, such as economics, law and social sciences.

More information is available on the Library web pages

Especially relevant electronic resources are:

Databases

Business Source Complete (management, business, ...), *EconLit* (economics, finance, economic theory, ...), *Factiva* (financial-economic information and news), *LexisNexis* (legal and financial-economic information), *ISI Web of Science* (social sciences, sciences, ...), *MathSciNet* (mathematics), *CIS Extended Database* (statistical sciences), *Il Foro italiano* and *InfoLEGES.it* (law), *Historical Abstracts* (history). For many articles the full text is available. Financial and economic data (quotations, equities, indexes, bonds, balance sheets, macroeconomic data, ...) can be retrieved from databases such as *Aida*, *Amadeus*, *Bankscope*, *Datastream*, *Bondware*, and similar.

E-journals

Multidisciplinary collections: *EbscoHost EJS*, *Elsevier/Kluwer*, *Jstor*; specialistic collections: *Bepress Journals* (economics), *Emerald* (management), *Kluwer Law International* (law), *Il Mulino Rivisteweb* (social sciences). Electronics journals allow to retrieve the full text of articles published generally after the middle of the 1990s, except *Jstor*, the main resource for articles published in international academic journals between the end of the 1800s until the 1970s and 1980s.

Working papers

Working papers produced by single academic institutions or research centres (e.g. NBER, CEPR) as well as working papers archives, such as *EconPapers* (<http://econpapers.repec.org/>) and *Social Science Research Network - SSRN* (<http://www.ssrn.com>).

Statistics

The Library's Electronic Resources Service has selected statistical resources produced by Italian and international statistical agencies and freely accessible on the web. In addition to these, a remarkable amount of statistics on subscription (e.g. *SourceOECD*, *World Development Indicators*, *UN Contrade*) is available for the Bocconi users only in order to offer a single access point to multiple sources to facilitate socio-economic research.

Worth a note is *ICPSR* (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research), a

a vast archive of socio-economic data available to members of ICPSR consortium, which Bocconi takes part to.

The Library offers also several services to support research and studying: borrowing (20 books for final year MSc students), interlibrary loan, reference, support in selecting the appropriate resources, as well as help and assistance in using the electronic resources effectively. Courses on library and bibliographic instruction are also offered as educational integrative activity to all students aimed at enabling them to utilize library resources efficiently for course assignments and theses. Especial emphasis is given to the use of the electronic resources and the web, as well as to the evaluation and selection of appropriate information.